

State has money to meet CHIP demands

By MATT GOURAS - Associated Press - 10/17/07 – Helena Independent Record

Montana officials are encouraging families to keep applying for a children's health insurance program despite its uncertain fate in Congress.

Democrats in Congress are currently working to override President Bush's veto of legislation expanding the State Children's Health Insurance Program, known in Montana as CHIP. A vote in the U.S. House is expected Thursday.

The showdown casts a shadow over the exact future of the popular program.

Jackie Forba, CHIP bureau chief at the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, said the state has enough money to fund the program until the issue gets worked out.

"We estimate we have enough money to insure kids for the next 9 to 12 months," Forba said.

The agency said it doesn't currently have a waiting list for the benefits and is encouraging families to keep applying for the coverage.

"I really do want to get the word out to families that if they are interested in insuring their kids, they should apply for CHIP," she said.

The program, which covers more than 15,000 children in Montana, is open to families that earn up to 175 percent of the poverty level — or about \$36,100 for a family of four.

The state got \$15.9 million in federal money for the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, and some matching state money.

U.S. Sen. Max Baucus has been a leading proponent of the program. The Montana Democrat, featured Saturday in his party's weekly radio address, has been pressuring Republicans in the U.S. House on the issue.

The legislation would increase spending for the State Children's Health Insurance Program by \$35 billion over five years. Bush has called for a \$5 billion increase.

Democrats are uncertain they can amass the two-thirds majority needed to override Bush's veto.

U.S. Rep. Denny Rehberg, R-Mont., has said he will vote to override the veto. The Senate earlier approved the increase by a veto-proof margin, including the support of Baucus and U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont.

Democrats say they plan to keep pushing to expand the program, even if they can't override President Bush's veto. But failure to compromise with the White House means the program will operate at existing funding levels through Nov. 16, and possibly, for several months after that point.

Forba said Montana has not needed a contingency plan seen in other states that don't have a financial cushion for their CHIP programs.

Other states have been forced to consider waiting lists and other measures in case the issue continues to get bogged down in Congress.